

Missing the Point

This is in reply to a letter by Alexander Eremenko (*Notices*, Vol. 59, No. 5, May 2012), titled “Uncritical use of citation database”. This letter referred to our paper in the *Notices* (J. Panaretos and C. Malesios “Influential Mathematicians: Birth, Education and Affiliation”, February 2012, vol. 59 (2), pp. 274–286).

A. Eremenko criticizes the inadequacies of the Thomson Database HCR list. He also questions whether the number of citations is a reasonable measure of the scientific influence of a mathematician. Unfortunately, he is completely missing the point of the paper.

As is quite clearly stated in its introduction and conclusions, the purpose of our paper was *not* to rank mathematicians (e.g., by selecting the “most influential”) or to argue in favor of citations as a measure of assessing the quality of mathematicians—on the contrary we made extensive mention of the shortcomings of the use of citation statistics.

Its purpose was to point out that, when citations are used as an institutional/national indicator (whether we like it or not), they reflect only the current affiliation of the scientists; we wanted to investigate whether a different picture emerges when the mobility patterns of these influential mathematicians are taken into consideration.

For better or worse, a database that is often used for citation indicators is the Thomson database. Notwithstanding the weaknesses that this or any other similar database may have, it would be hard to question the fact that most of the mathematicians included in the list have had noteworthy mathematical and/or scientific influence. Are they the “most” influential? This we did not presume to judge anywhere in our paper. Are they even the most cited? We did not claim this either, and referred to them as “highly cited”. Would the inclusion or exclusion of a few names drastically change the emerging mobility patterns? Certainly not.

Indicators and databases are here to stay, and instead of simply rejecting them as “almost useless”,

it is important to critically extract as much useful information as we can from them, while pointing out their weaknesses and deficiencies. Doing so is much more likely to communicate the special aspects of our subject to decision-makers and the general public and to advocate for better quantitative measures.

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Correction

The photograph of John G. Hocking (*Notices*, March 2013, page 335), should have been credited “Photo © 2010 Susan Marie Davis”. The *Notices* apologizes for this omission.

—Sandy Frost